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# HOW ARE WE DOING?

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS AS MEASURED BY THE VOCATIONS AND VIEWS OF GRADUATES

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## ARE SEMINARIES AND RABBINICAL SCHOOLS DOING THEIR JOBS?

**A** *Criticisms and doubts about the effectiveness of theological education come from several quarters. Denominational executives who are responsible for clergy placement and oversight report their schedules are dominated by students with problems. These problems are, they say, at least partly the result of theological schools' failure to screen the students they graduate and to train them for professional religious practice.<sup>1</sup> Executives and other critics also point to "the ones who get away"—the numbers of seminary graduates who steer clear of congregational ministry or, indeed, any ministry at all, and the additional numbers who leave after short periods of service.*

They suspect theological faculty of subverting the purposes of the schools in which they teach by steering the students toward advanced study and teaching and away from congregational ministry. Those who take unusual vocational paths have received a good

deal of media attention. Reporters seem fascinated with people trained for religious service who choose starkly secular pursuits such as elected office or business.

Some observers question whether theological schooling does much good at all. As evidence that theological education

may not be necessary for effective leadership, they point to “megachurches” and other new and growing religious movements whose founders never went to seminary and who are now training the next generation of leaders in their congregations or organizations. And indeed, one national study in the United States found that ministers who hold graduate theological degrees are no more likely than those with no degrees to lead congregations that have “a sense of vitality, clarity of purpose, membership growth, confidence about the future and ability to deal with conflict.”<sup>2</sup>

For the past two years, the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education and the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) have pooled their resources to examine the best indicators of the quality of theological and rabbinical schools: their graduates.

In 2005 the Auburn Center conducted a survey of Masters-level graduates from 1995 and 2000<sup>3</sup> from all ATS member institutions and from three rabbinical schools that agreed to participate.<sup>4</sup> ATS provided data from the Entering Student Questionnaire (ESQ) and Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ) that it offers on a fee basis to its member institutions.<sup>5</sup> In addition, ATS enrollment data provided by all its member schools were analyzed to establish trends that provide a backdrop for the survey results.

Findings from all these sources are organized in this report to address two questions at the heart of any evaluation of the effectiveness of theological schools: (1) what do graduates do in the years after they complete their education and (2) how well do they think their theological training prepared them for their work?

## Vocation

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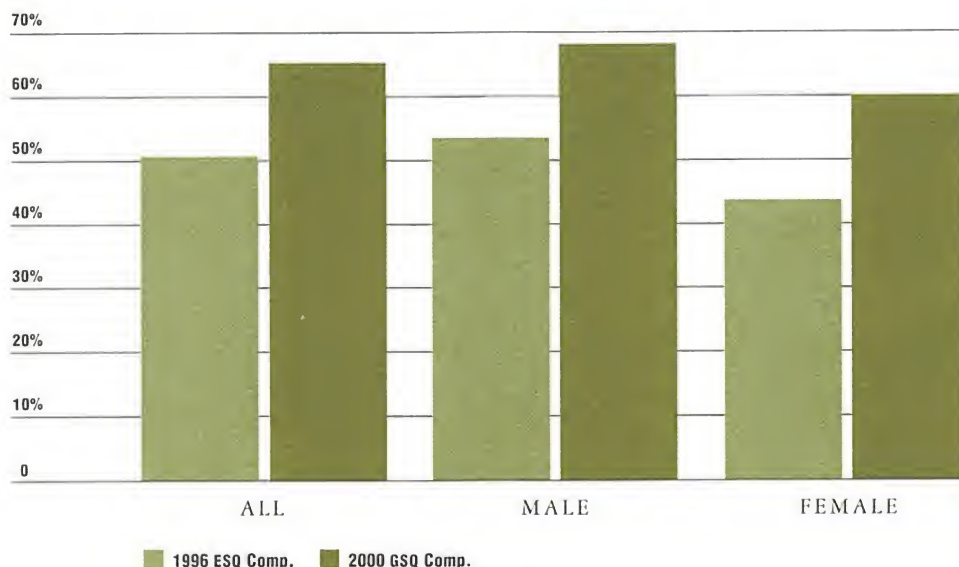
One measure of the adequacy of theological schools is whether their graduates function in the roles that religious communities and the wider society expect them to fill. The primary social function of North American theological schools—most agree—is to prepare religious professionals for ministry, most often as ordained clergy.<sup>6</sup> Ministry takes diverse forms, but the dominant one is pastoral ministry in a congregation. Most participants in and supporters of theological education would agree that if theological institutions do not produce good leaders for North America’s congregations,

estimated to be about 300,000 in number, they are failing in their major task.

How well do theological schools serve this primary purpose? Do they, as critics charge, often deflect students who enroll from pursuing ordained ministry as a vocational goal, orienting them instead to academic vocations? How many graduates go immediately to work in congregations or other forms of ministry? If they do take that path early in their careers, do they stay on it or—as is sometimes rumored—do they leave

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**Figure 1: Congregational Position Sought After Graduation,  
M.Div.'s Entering 1996 and Graduating 2000**



ministry in distressingly high numbers in those first years?

Analysis of Auburn Center and ATS data yielded surprising answers to some of these questions.

*The first finding is one of those surprises:*

**INTEREST IN CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY  
INCREASES DURING SEMINARY.**

In fact, it increases quite dramatically. Only half of all students matriculating in the Master of Divinity (M.Div.; or equivalent degree that prepares for ordination) said when they completed the ESQ in 1996 that their first choice of position would be congregational ministry (Figure 1). By the time many of them graduated in 2000, however, two-thirds recorded on the GSQ that congregational ministry was their first choice. Not only do theological schools not discourage student interest in ministry; they actually encourage it.

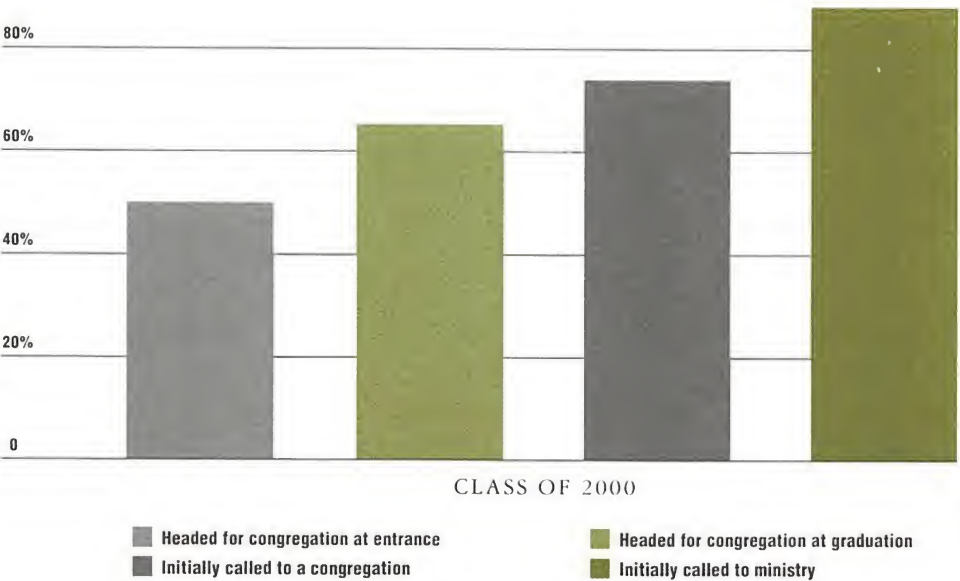
Further, although men have a higher level of interest than women when they enter (54 percent compared with 44 percent, as Figure 1 shows), the rate of increase of women's interest during their theological school years is as much as—in fact, slightly more than—men's.

*A second finding is equally surprising:*

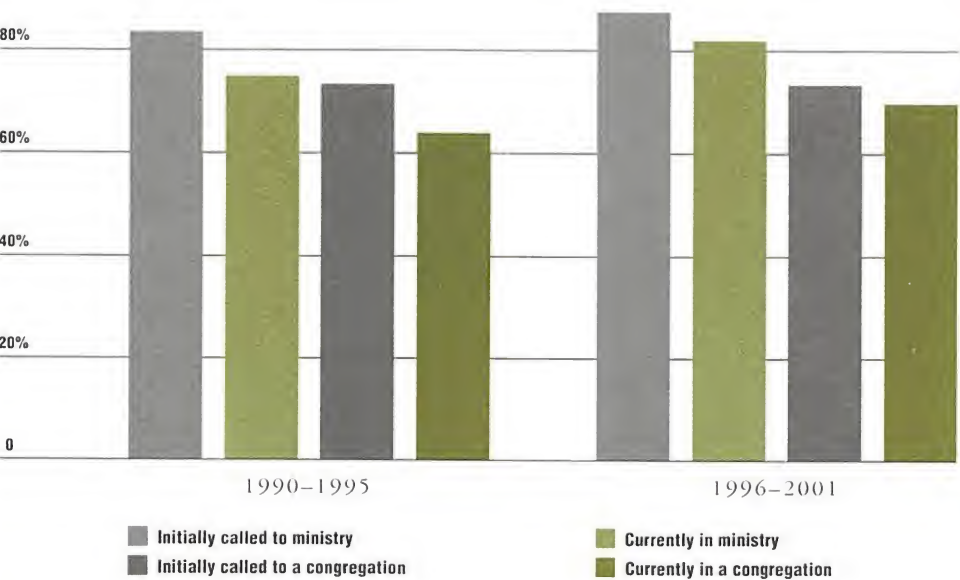
**MORE GRADUATES ENTER CONGREGATIONAL  
MINISTRY THAN SAY THEY PLAN TO  
BEFORE GRADUATION.**

Figure 2 shows that although two-thirds of graduates in M.Div. programs say just before graduation that they are headed for the congregation, substantially more than that—almost three-quarters—end up there in their first position.<sup>7</sup> This is one indication of a pattern that

**Figure 2: Calls to Ministry and Congregations: M.Div. 2000 Graduates**



**Figure 3: Initial and Current Calls to Ministry and Congregational Ministry: M.Div./Rabbinical/Cantorial Graduates by Cohort**



recurs in Auburn Center and ATS data: theological school graduates entertain a wide variety of vocational possibilities, especially ministry outside the congregation, and often they say that such alternatives are their first choice, but many of them finally decide to remain in or move to a job in a congregation. An additional 14 percent, it should be noted, choose some other form of ministry. Thus, in the aggregate, nearly 90 percent of graduates of M.Div. and equivalent programs of seminaries and divinity and rabbinical schools go immediately into some form of professional religious service, and more of them go into what many regard as the normative forms of that service—parish ministry, congregational ministry, or the pulpit rabbinate.

*A third finding corrects the widely held impression that ministers in their early years of service lack staying power:*

**ATTRITION IN THE FIRST YEARS OF MINISTRY IS LOW.**

Figure 3 shows percentages of the M.Div. graduating classes by cohort (those graduating between 1990 and 1995, and those graduating between 1996 and 2001) who were initially called to any form of ministry, initially called to congregational ministry, currently in any form of ministry, and currently in congregational ministry. (The “in ministry” percentages include the “in congregational ministry” percentages.) The class of 1995 had been in the field ten years at the time of the 2005 survey. Over this decade both the percentage in ministry and the percentage in congregational ministry dropped by about 10 percent. For the class of 2000,

the attrition rate was about 5 percent over five years in both ministry and congregational ministry. These rates—on average, about 1 percent per year—are not high. Indeed, more students in M.Div. programs decline to enter ministry (12 percent) and congregational

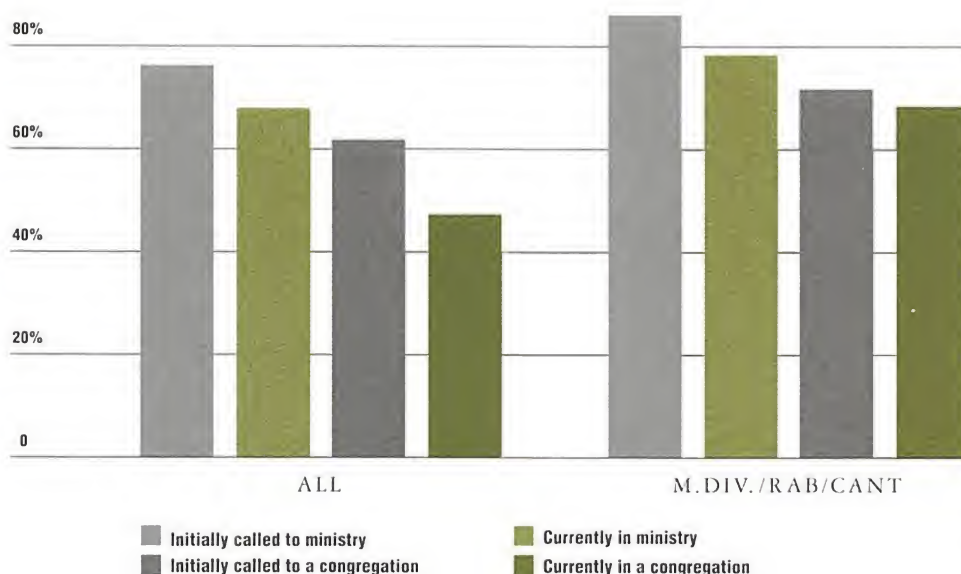
**Nearly 90 percent of M.Div. graduates go immediately into some form of professional religious service, and 74 percent of them go into parish or congregational ministry or the pulpit rabbinate.**

ministry (26 percent in 2000) than leave ministry (8 percent) or congregational ministry (5 percent) over the next five to ten years (Figure 4).

The patterns of different religious traditions are remarkably similar, although there are a few notable differences. In all cases, 88 percent or more of M.Div. graduates of ATS schools and rabbinical and cantorial graduates enter ministry of some sort. About the same percentage of M.Div. graduates of Protestant schools, both mainline and evangelical, are ordained. Fewer graduates of Roman Catholic M.Div. programs are ordained (75 percent). Almost all rabbinical and cantorial students are ordained because ordination is conferred by their seminary faculties at graduation. Attrition rates in ministry and congregational ministry are higher than average for evangelicals but still less than 2 percent per year, and lower than average for graduates of Roman Catholic and Jewish schools.



**Figure 4: Initial and Current Calls to All Forms of Ministry and Congregational Ministry: All Graduates and M.Div./Rabbinical/Cantorial Graduates**



Patterns among racial and ethnic groups do not vary a great deal, except that Asians and Asian Americans are less likely to choose ministry pursuits (possibly because many are preparing to teach in their home country) and African Americans are slightly more likely than other groups to enter ministry and congregational ministry after graduation, and much more likely to stay in such positions.

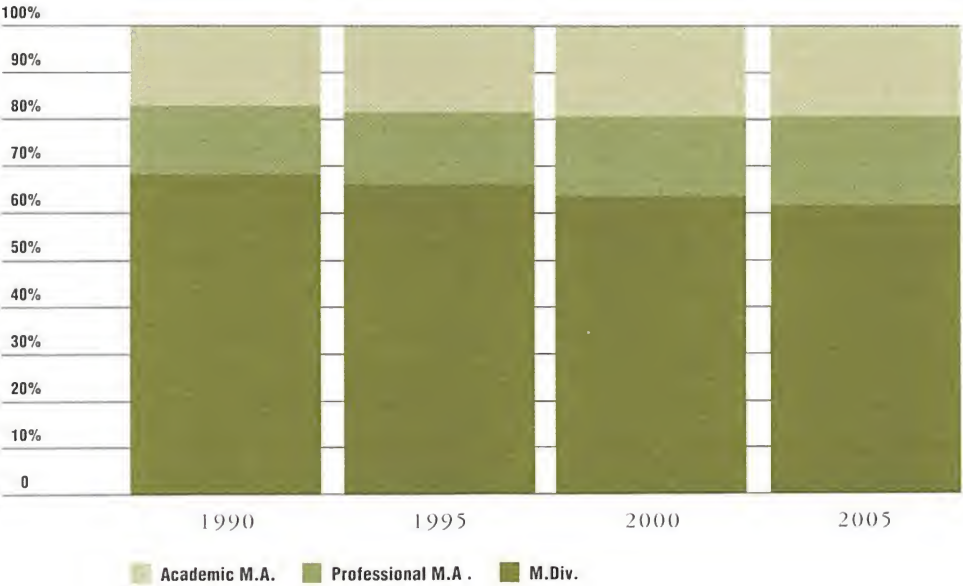
**Over the decade, the percentage of graduates in ministry and the percentage specifically in congregational ministry dropped by about 10 percent, or averaged 1 percent a year.**

*One more finding contradicts the conventional wisdom about the career trajectories of graduates of theological schools:*

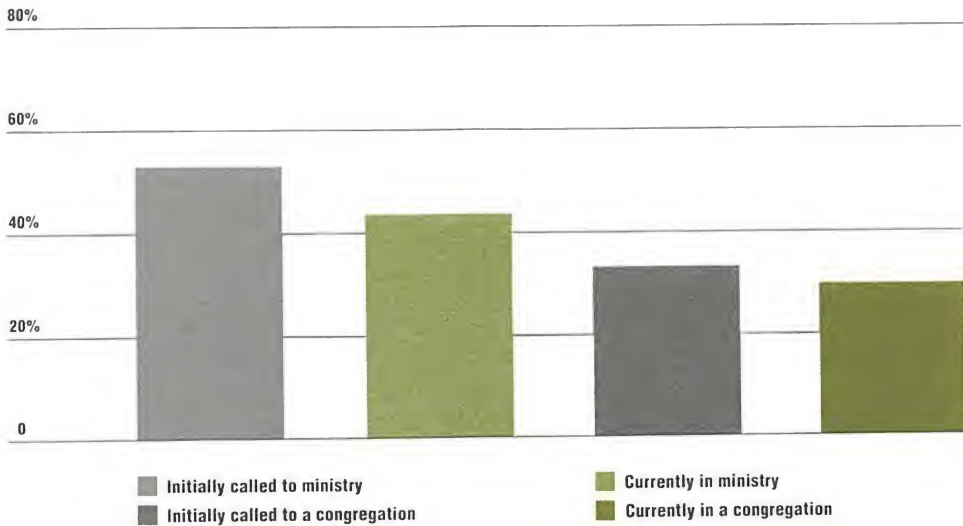
**MANY GRADUATES OF MASTER OF ARTS PROGRAMS SERVE IN MINISTRY, INCLUDING MORE THAN ONE-THIRD IN CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY.**

A major change in theological education in the last two decades has been the growth of specialized Master of Arts (M.A.) programs. As Figure 5 shows, M.A. programs account for an increasing percentage of all headcount enrollment in ATS schools. Most of the growth has been in professional programs,<sup>8</sup> but academic M.A.'s have held their own. (Note that there has been real enrollment growth in all the programs on this graph, but professional M.A.'s have grown faster than other programs.) Growth in M.A. programs has often been interpreted as a sign that interest

**Figure 5: Relative Head Count Enrollment by Degree Category, ATS Schools, 1990-2005**



**Figure 6: Initial and Current Calls to Ministry and Congregational Ministry: Masters Graduates**



in ministry, and in congregational ministry in particular, is waning among today's students.

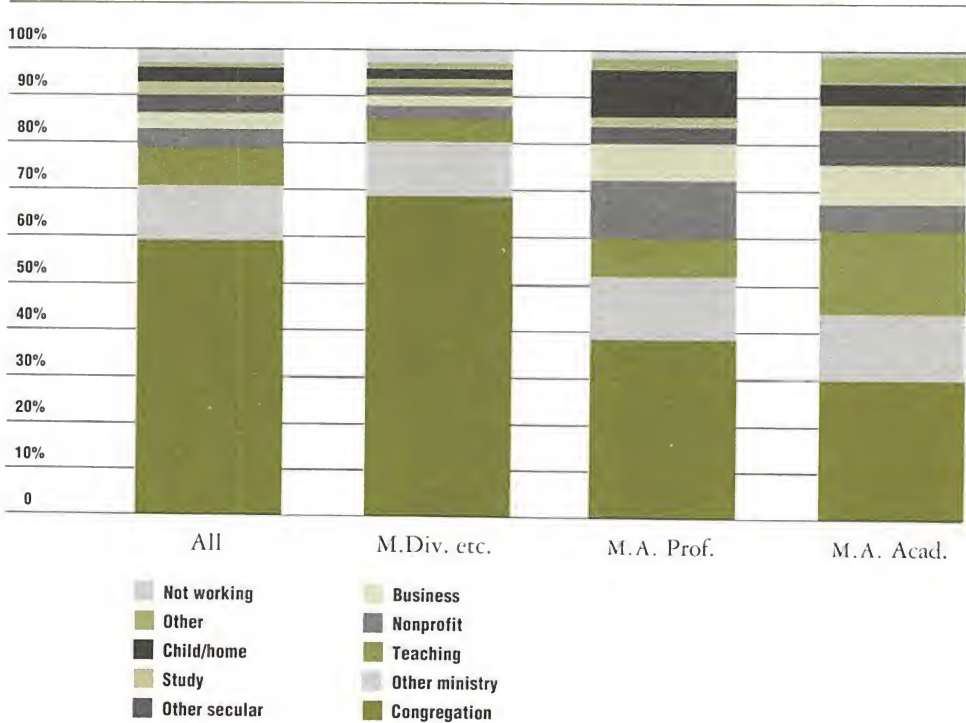
Figure 6 suggests that M.A. programs do not necessarily steer students away from ministry. More than half of all those with an M.A. degree in our sample of those who graduated in 1995 and 2000 take some kind of ministerial position after graduation, and many remain in such positions. Even more notable, one-third of them serve in congregations after graduation and virtually the same percentage is still there. Even more of those in professional M.A. programs, 40 percent, chose the congregation as their first field of service and 58 percent are ordained or licensed. For many, the M.A. is an alternate route to ministry rather than a road to other occupations.

*What do graduates do who do not choose ministry after graduation?*

**MOST GRADUATES WHO DO NOT GO INTO MINISTRY CHOOSE CLOSELY RELATED OCCUPATIONS.**

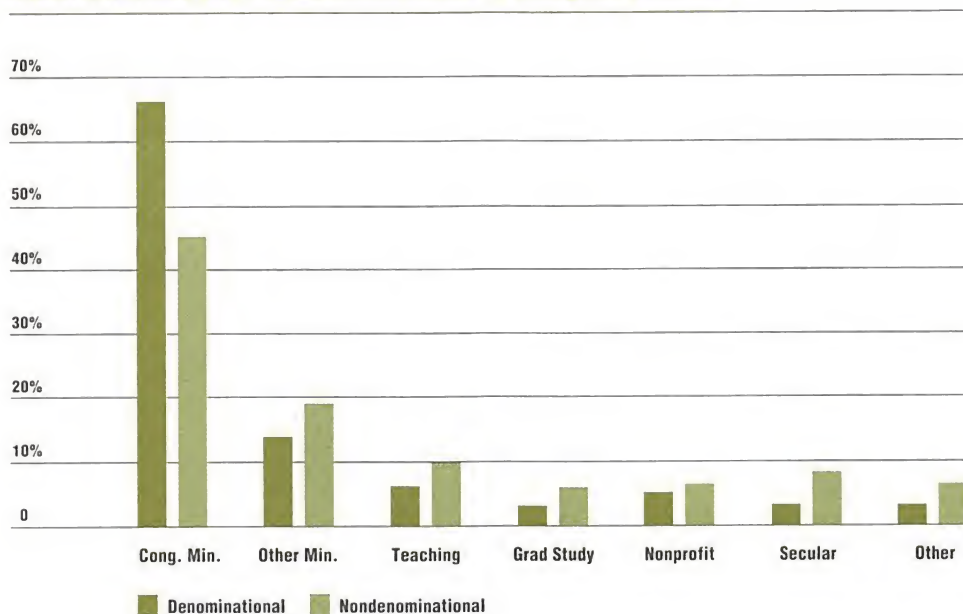
As Figure 7 shows, most graduates who are not currently in some field of ministry are in professions that are linked to ministry or closely related: 15 percent of the total sample and 10 percent of the M.Div. and equivalent graduates are teaching, working for a nonprofit organization, or pursuing graduate study. Fewer (7 percent of all graduates and 4 percent of those in M.Div. programs) are in business or other "secular" positions. The small remainder are either caring for children or parents at home or are retired. Even allowing for the possibility that those

**Figure 7: What Else Are They Doing? All Grads, M.Div./Rabbinical/Cantorial Grads and Professional and Academic M.A.'s**





**Figure 8: First Postgraduation Position of All Graduates of Denominational and Nondenominational Theological Schools**



whose occupations are most remote from the intended uses of theological degrees may not be adequately represented in the sample, one can conclude that a large majority of Master's-level theological degrees are put to use in a religious profession or some closely related undertaking.

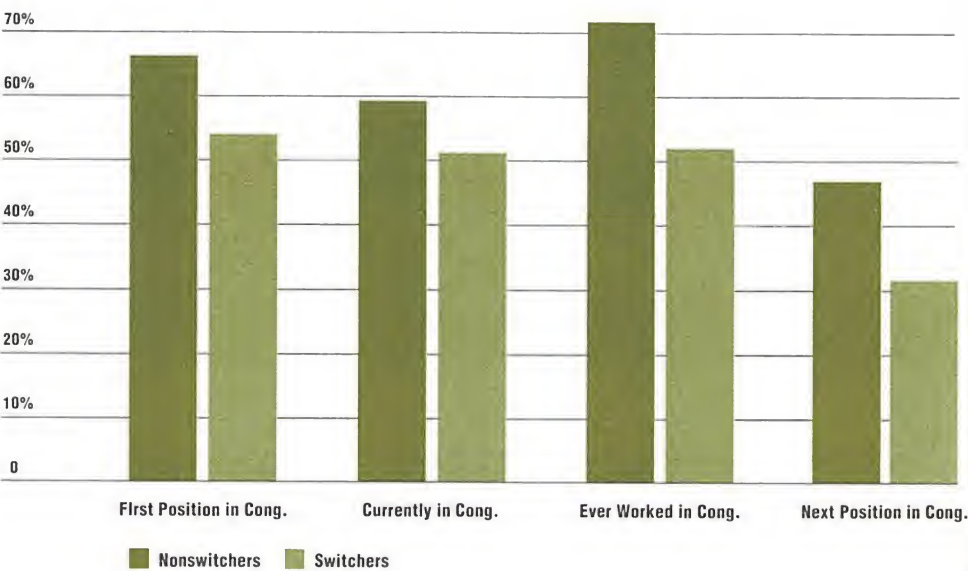
*There is one final sign that theological schools are supplying the society's diverse needs for religious leadership:*

**DIFFERENT TYPES OF THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS SUPPLY DIFFERENT KINDS OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP.**

Pastoral ministry in a congregation has always been the dominant form of ministry in North America, and the majority of theological schools send the majority of their graduates to serve in that capacity. Religious life today is, however, pluriform—some say more

than ever before—and it requires many kinds of leadership. As Figure 8 shows, one group of schools—those with no formal ties to a denomination—specialize in providing the needed variety. These institutions (which are 22 percent of the total number of ATS member schools, enrolled 31 percent of students) send less than half of their new graduates (45 percent) into congregational ministry, a sharp contrast to the two-thirds of all graduates of denominational schools who take a first position in a congregation. Reciprocally, they send higher percentages of graduates into other occupations: specialized ministry, teaching, graduate study, nonprofit institutions, and secular work. As might be expected, many fewer of their graduates in our sample (55 percent) are ordained (73 percent of

**Figure 9: Denominational Switching and Congregational Ministry**



graduates of denominational seminaries are ordained) or are now (five or ten years after graduation) working in a congregation (63 percent of denominational school graduates, but only 50 percent of others, are still in congregational ministry).

As might also be expected, a higher percentage of graduates of nondenominational schools have switched from one denomination or religious tradition to another. More switching occurs before graduation from theological school than after. Almost half of all graduates (43 percent) switched denominations at sometime in their lives before graduation, but only 19 percent did so after, and one-third had switched denominations more than once. Switchers are more likely than nonswitchers to enroll in M.A. programs and to say that they were not interested in a professional religious position when they entered

seminary. Not surprisingly, they are less likely to minister in congregations and to remain in ministerial positions or to want their next position to be in a congregation (see Figure 9).

A cluster of factors, then, including graduation from a nondenominational school, switching denominations before or after graduation, and enrollment in an M.A. rather than an M.Div. degree program, mark the group of graduates that is more likely to be working in something other than congregational ministry. A much larger group is more likely to have earned an M.Div. degree, graduated from a denominational seminary, and held life-long membership in one denomination. Quite a number of graduates, of course, mix these characteristics, but the different general types are discernible in the graduates

of denominational and nondenominational schools. This specialization is an indicator of strength in the theological education enterprise as a whole. Whether by plan or in response to market pressures, schools have organized themselves to meet diverse needs for religious leadership rather than stretching their resources to do everything at once.

*Taken together, the findings reported so far show that theological schools are doing their jobs as measured by the vocational trajectories of their graduates. Other findings, however, reveal problems and trends that theological schools and those who depend on them should address.*

**WOMEN ARE LESS LIKELY TO ENTER MINISTRY AND TO STAY, AND THEY ENCOUNTER MORE OBSTACLES IN RELIGIOUS PROFESSIONS.**

On almost every measure, men appear to enter and advance in ministry more easily than women. More of all graduating men (80 percent of men; 73 percent of women) enter some form of ministry after graduation, and more men who enter ministry stay (76 percent of men; 64 percent of women are currently serving in ministry). Half of this gap of 12 percent could be the result of the “mommy factor”; 6.5 percent of women graduates are engaged in child or elder care (compared with 0.7 percent of men), but other factors must also be in play. One may be financial: women graduates are more likely to be single, widowed, or divorced, and thus entirely self-supporting, and another Auburn Center study suggests that these are the students with the greatest seminary educational debt upon graduation, perhaps forcing some to accept positions

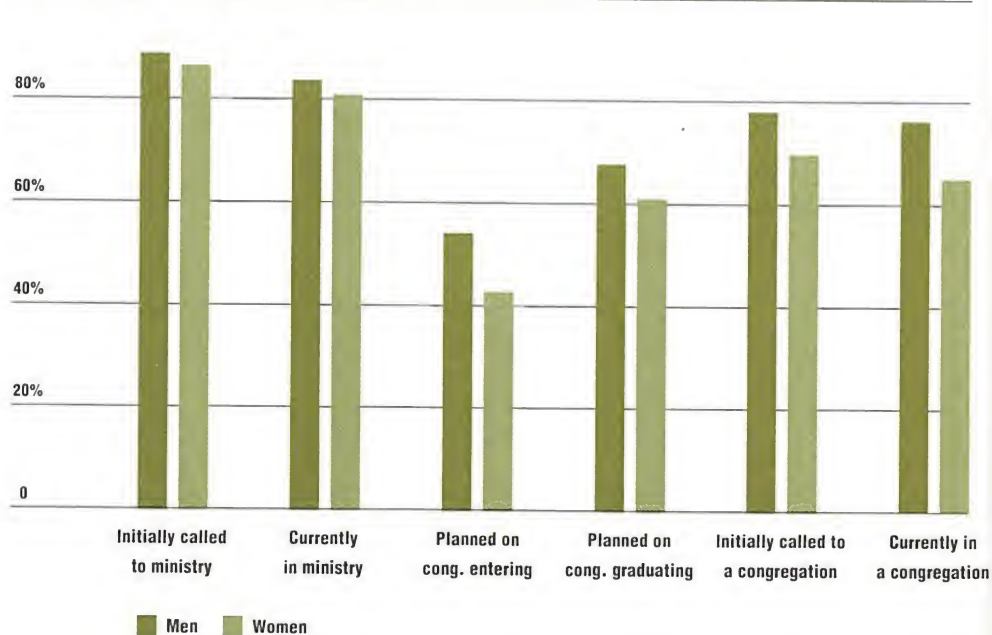
that pay better than entry ministry jobs.<sup>9</sup> Women are much less likely to be serving currently in a congregation (48 percent of women; 64 percent of men). Even graduates of mainline Protestant schools, most of whom are eligible for ordination in their religious community, are less likely to be ordained (78 percent of men; 71 percent of women).

Figure 10 compares a subset of all graduates: men and women who earned M.Div. or equivalent degrees in 2000. It shows that women who hold such degrees enter and remain in ministry at almost the same rates as men, but are less likely to enter congregational ministry and are more likely to leave it during the first five years. (Figure 11 shows current positions held for women and men *not* in congregations.) It is encouraging that women graduates of mainline Protestant schools who are more likely to be ordained have attrition rates no higher than those of men, but women do not rise as high on the ladder in congregational

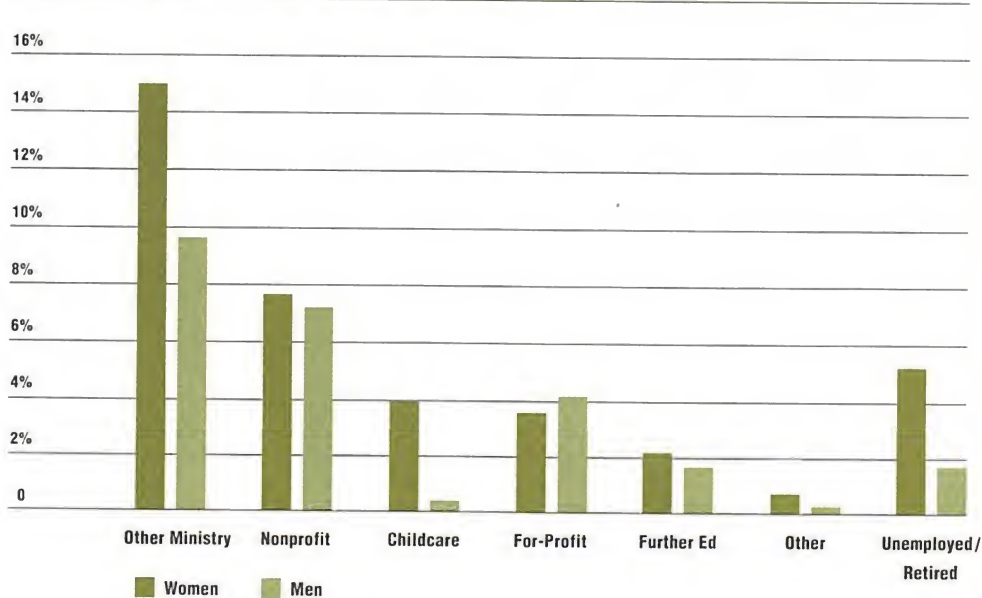
**Women who hold M.Div. or equivalent degrees enter and remain in ministry at almost the same rates as men, but are less likely to enter congregational ministry and are more likely to leave it during the first five years.**

ministry. Ordained women currently serving in a congregation are less likely to be heads of staff (18 percent of men in our sample and 5 percent of women) and more likely to be associate pastors

**Figure 10: Initial and Current Calls to Ministry and Congregational Ministry: M.Div., Rabbinical and Cantorial 2000 Graduates, Women and Men**



**Figure 11: Current Positions Other than Congregation, M.Div. Rabbinical, and Cantorial Graduates, Women and Men**





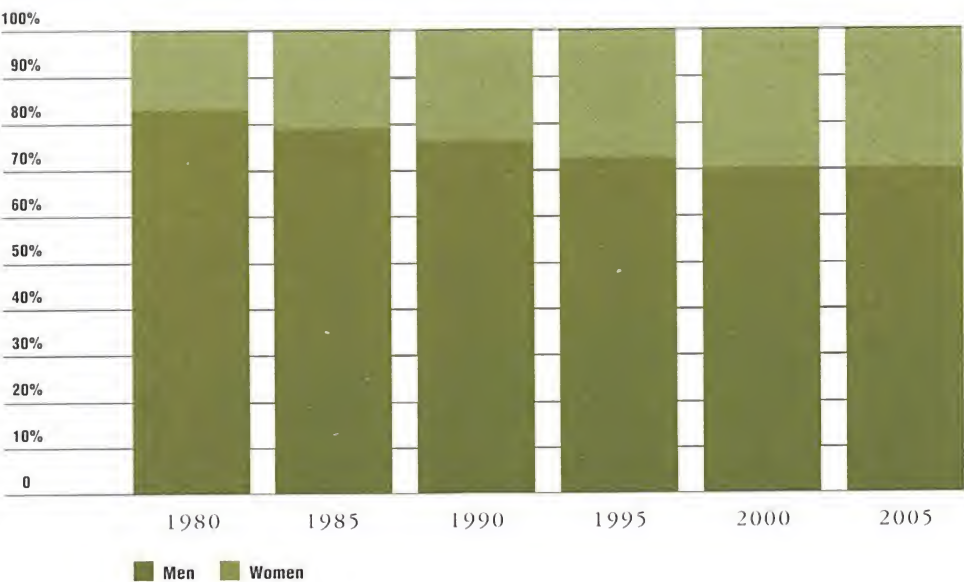
(17 percent of men and 26 percent of women) or interim pastors. Women are much more likely to serve part-time: 25 percent of ordained women, but only 11 percent of ordained men say that their position in a congregation is part-time. Twice as many women as men (21 percent of women, 11 percent of men) report that it took them longer than a year to find their first position in a congregation. They also are more likely to say that their skills are not being sufficiently used in ministry and to express uncertainty about whether they will remain in congregational ministry in the future. The gender barrier to ministry, even in denominations that ordain women, has not been completely dismantled.

*Several recent trends indicate that the pool of graduates inclined to consider ministry, especially in congregations, may be smaller in the future.*

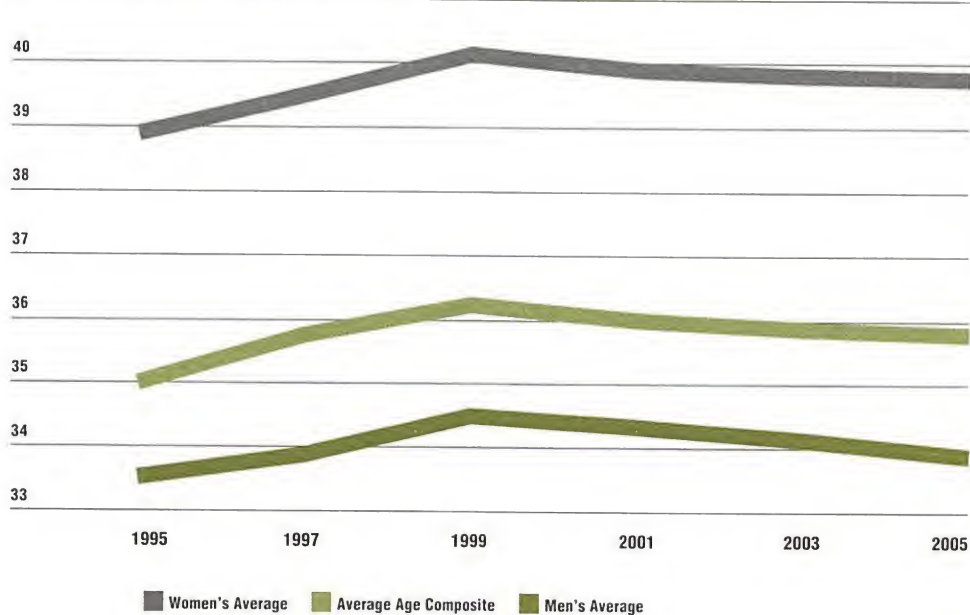
**THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL STUDENTS AND GRADUATES ARE INCREASINGLY LESS INTERESTED IN MINISTRY, ESPECIALLY IN CONGREGATIONS.**

Several categories of theological students show greater interest in serving in congregational and other ministries than their counterparts: as already shown, more than twice the percentage of M.Div. graduates as M.A. graduates take a first post in ministry, and men have greater interest in congregational ministry than women. Other studies have shown that older students are more likely to want to serve in congregations than younger ones.<sup>10</sup> Figure 5 showed that M.Div. headcount enrollment, though growing slightly in real numbers, has been shrinking as a percentage of total enrollments. Figure 12 shows that

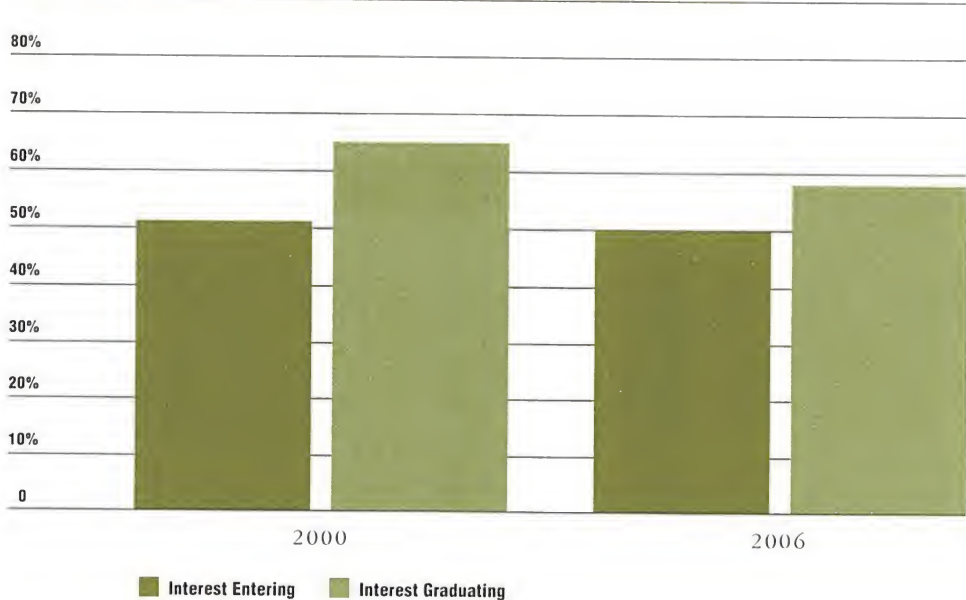
**Figure 12: Relative M.Div. Head Count Enrollment by Gender, 1980-2005**



**Figure 13: Average Age of M.Div. Students by Gender, 1995-2005**



**Figure 14: Interest in Congregational Ministry, 2000 and 2006**

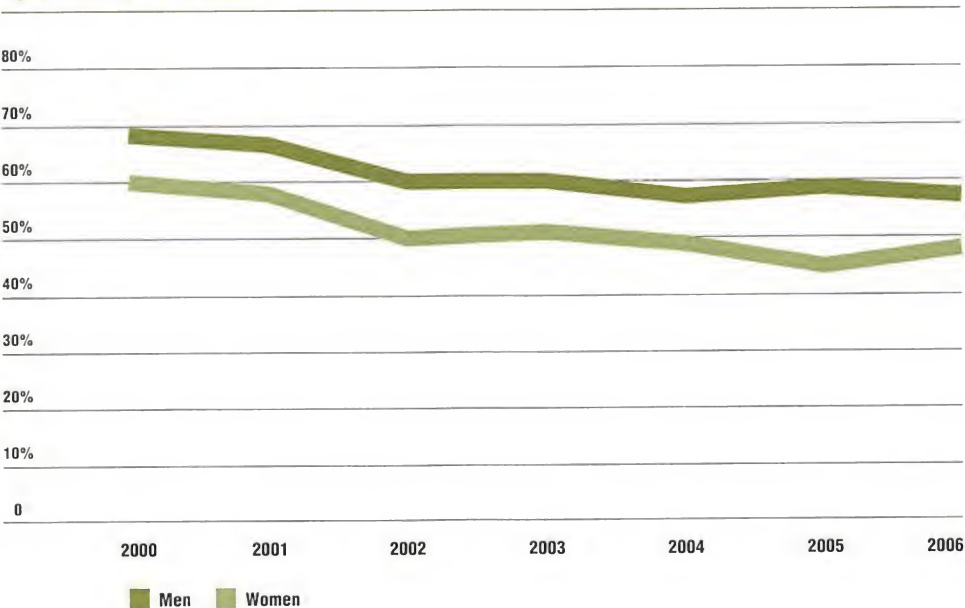


relative enrollments of men are shrinking as well, and Figure 13 shows a slight but continuing decrease in average student age for both men and women, although women still average almost six years older than men. The decrease in average student age is probably the result of sustained efforts in the last decade to recruit younger students—efforts that continue and that we recommend be sustained in the years to come. All the groups in which interest in congregational ministry has been strongest, in other words, are likely to form a smaller portion of the pool of graduates in the future.

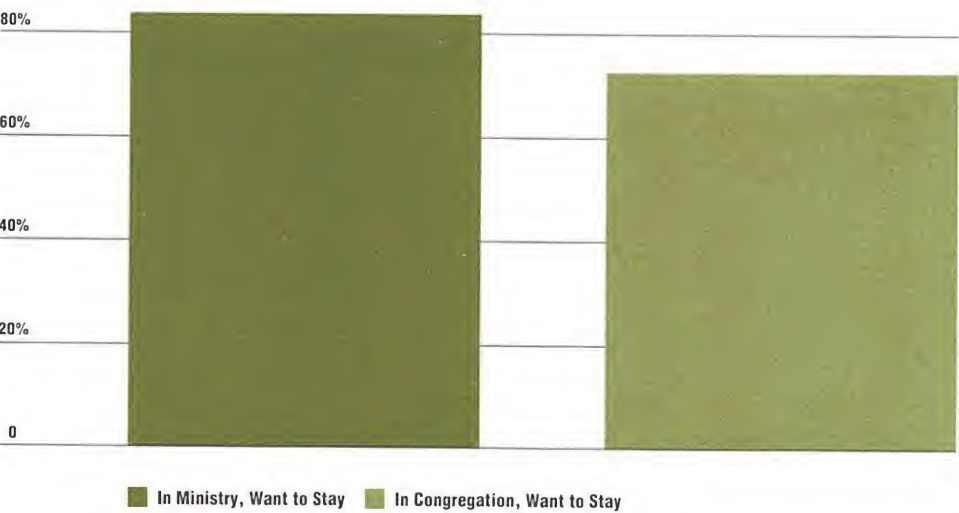
There is additional direct evidence of this trend. Figure 14 shows that although theological schooling continues to draw students toward an interest in

congregational ministry, the increase for those graduating in 2006 was notably less than for those graduating in 2000 (8 percent compared with 14 percent). Figure 15 illustrates that interest is declining among both male and female graduating students. It is also the case, as shown in Figure 16, that one-fifth of those now serving in ministry and one-fourth of those currently serving in congregations say they want to do something different in their next position. A very few (less than 2 percent) graduates say they will “definitely” leave congregational ministry, but an additional 20 percent say they “probably” will leave (5 percent) or are uncertain about their future direction (15 percent). As earlier noted, there is evidence that some of those

**Figure 15: Graduating M.Div. Students Anticipating Congregational Ministry, By Gender, 2000-2006**



**Figure 16: Where Graduates Want to Work Next: Percentages of M.Div., Rabbinical and Cantorial Graduates Who Want Same Kind of Position**



who want to find an alternative to ministry will not succeed in doing so or will change their minds.

Graduates' attitudes toward ministry, as reflected in responses to the query "Would you encourage a young person to consider ministry or a religious profession?" raise additional questions about the future. Very few respondents say no (a sharp contrast to anecdotal accounts that "most ministers" would not encourage a young person to consider ministry). And although the graduates we surveyed persist in ministry at high rates and express high satisfaction with their work, more than one-third of those now serving in ministry and almost one-half of those in other occupations, say they would recommend ministry only "with reservations." Combined

with waning interest among students and with what may be normal attrition in mid-career among graduates, these reservations could be a factor leading to a smaller pool of candidates for ministerial positions in the future.

**SUMMARY: THE CAREER PATTERNS OF THEOLOGICAL AND RABBINICAL SCHOOL GRADUATES**

How unusual are the patterns of vocational choice traced in the Auburn Center/ATS data? Only limited comparative data from other professions are available. Some studies similar to this one have been conducted of the graduates of schools of social work, a profession that resembles ministry in important ways. Social workers, like ministers, may or may not be trained at the graduate level. Most practitioners in both professions work for institutions or agencies rather than function



independently. In both cases, salary levels are fairly low and most members of the profession are motivated by altruism.

A recent study of licensed social workers shows that the patterns of relationship between graduate-level schooling and the primary profession for which it prepares are very similar to the patterns in theological education.<sup>11</sup> About three-quarters of theological school graduates initially go into the primary form of ministry practice: pastoral positions in congregations. About the same proportion of graduates of social work schools (70 percent) take a first position in a social work agency or department, the primary venue for that profession. Other graduates of both social work and theological schools take a variety of paths, most of which build on their professional training in some way.

As the years wear on, in both ministry and social work, those who took the primary route at the start follow one of two tracks: some stay in the primary form of practice—social agency work and congregational ministry, most of these working their way up to supervisory roles or senior pastorates. (Likewise, most lawyers start out working for firms, trained educators teach in school, and doctors enter private practices; many stay in these settings, working their way toward partnerships or tenure.) Others, after an initial period in the profession's front-line form of service, branch out into academic life or into other forms of practice. To sustain a profession, you need both: plenty of people at all levels of experience who stick with its primary form for the length of a career and many others who lead the institutions that support the

primary form of the profession. In the case of ministry these secondary forms of service include denominational executives, specialized ministers such as counselors and chaplains, leaders of ecumenical and religiously related agencies, and theological educators. Many social workers, physicians, lawyers, and teachers also move from the dominant form of practice to institutional leadership or education of the next generation of professionals.

The first answer, then, to the question about how well theological schools are doing their job is a positive one. They are supplying the profession with graduates for service on the front line of North American religious life, the local congregation.<sup>12</sup> Seminary programs succeed in drawing more students

**To sustain a profession, you need plenty of people who stick with its primary form for the length of a career and many others who lead the institutions that support the primary form of the profession.**

toward this form of service than enter with that interest. After ten years, the majority of those who serve congregations intend to go on doing so. Other graduates, often having attended nondenominational schools or holding M.A. degrees, either from the beginning or after a period of congregational service, are occupying other necessary roles.<sup>13</sup> One can argue that even those who never enter religious or related professions or who leave them after a

few years of religious service—less than 15 percent of graduates after ten years—fulfill the important purposes of creating an educated laity and transporting theological and religious perspectives into other sectors of social life. Indeed, some theological schools see these activities as out-workings of their mission and make them explicit goals.

As this report has shown, these positive findings are clouded by indications of possible future difficulties. Fewer students than five years ago are being attracted to ministry practice

**Unless the trends are reversed, the current balance—most graduates headed to the congregation and a smaller group to other important ministries and social roles—may be difficult to maintain.**

during seminary. This development may in part be an unintended consequence of the recruitment of younger students who are less likely to express an interest in congregational ministry when they enter seminary and to work in congregations when they graduate. No one would argue that theological schools should not be trying to recruit younger students, so special attention must be focused on introducing them to the full range of vocational options, including congregational ministry. The end of this report offers specific suggestions for how this might be accomplished.

The most complex issue overhanging the future is how to resolve the difficulties facing women in ministry. Schools whose sponsoring denominations have opened the full range of religious roles to women have seen their enrollments of women rise quickly to the level of 50 percent or even higher. Women who enter theological schools of any tradition frequently decide during seminary to pursue the goal of ordination, if it is available to them, and congregational ministry. When they graduate, however, they face obstacles: longer searches for positions, lower salaries, and fewer highly responsible positions. At the same time, the number of men entering theological schools is decreasing. The long-term consequences of these developments, combined with other factors associated with less interest in congregational ministry, could well be a substantially smaller pool of graduates willing to serve in and acceptable to congregations.

The problem is a special challenge because theological schools can do little to change the conditions and trends that affect their students' vocational choices, such as the attitudes that place unequal burdens on women in ministry. Schools' efforts to maintain the supply of congregational ministers in the face of these trends will be indirect at best. Unless the trends are reversed, however, the current balance—most graduates headed to the congregation and a smaller group to other important ministries and social roles—may be difficult to maintain. The recommendations at the end of this report will include suggestions about steps schools and their supporting denominations can take.

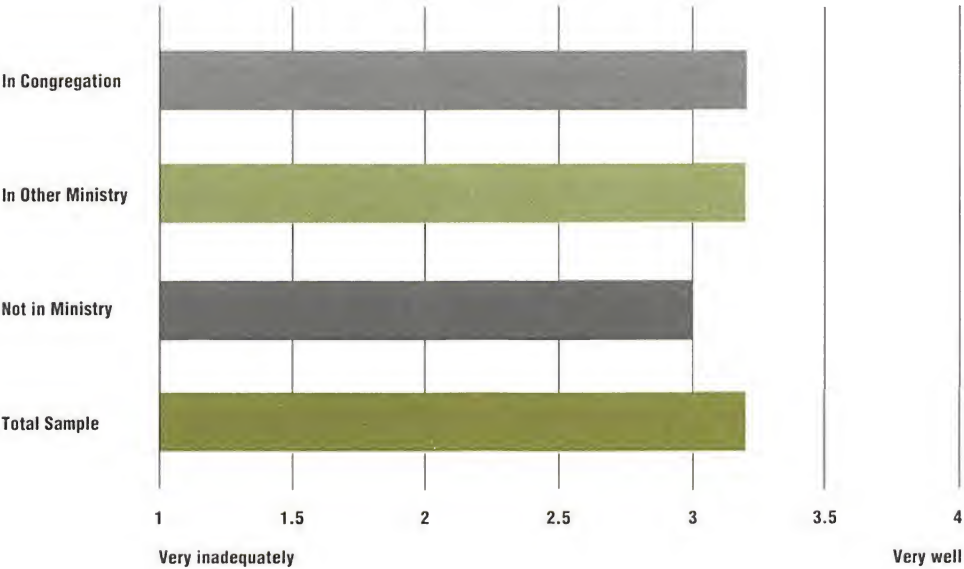
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So far this report has focused on graduates' vocational histories as an indicator of whether theological institutions produce an adequate supply of leaders willing to enter and able to persist in various positions of religious leadership. That is one way to measure whether the schools are doing a good job meeting the religious needs of church and society. Another approach is to ask graduates to rate the adequacy of their preparation. Both the ATS GSQ and the Auburn Survey include questions about instruction and other program elements.

*Many of the answers to these questions are encouraging.*

**OVERALL, THEOLOGICAL AND RABBINICAL SCHOOLS ARE HIGHLY RATED BY GRADUATES.** Theological education gets high grades from those who have completed it. On average, graduates rate their preparation higher than 3 on a four-point scale, where 4 is "very well" and 1 is "very inadequately" (Figure 17). Almost one-third gave the highest rating, "very well," and 58 percent the second highest, "well in some areas, not [well] in others."

**Figure 17: How Well Did Your Theological Education Prepare You? By Current Position**



**Figure 18: How Important Are The Following Areas Of Study To Your Professional Life And Work?**  
**Rank Order of Responses by Religious Tradition Of School**

	Mainline Protestant	Evangelical Protestant	Roman Catholic	Jewish
1	Bible	Bible	Bible	Bible/Talmud
2	Theology	Theology	Theology	Theology/Philosophy
3	Preaching	Spiritual Practices	Ethics	Pastoral Counseling
4	Spiritual Practices	Pastoral Counseling	Spiritual Practices	Field Education
5	Pastoral Counseling	Ethics	History	Preaching
6	Ethics	Missions	Pastoral Counseling	Ethics
7	Field Education	Preaching	Church & Society	History
8	History	History	Preaching	Religious Education
9	Church & Society	Field Education	Religious Education	Jewish Law
10	Religious Education	Church & Society	Canon Law	Cong. Administration
11	Missions	Religious Education	Field Education	Religion & Society
12	Church Polity	Cong. Administration	Missions	Faith Practices
13	World Religions	World Religions	World Religions	World Religions
14	Cong. Administration	Church Polity	Cong. Administration	

**TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC SUBJECTS AND FIELDS ARE MORE HIGHLY RATED THAN MOST PRACTICAL ONES.**

The chart in Figure 18 shows graduates’ rankings of curricular fields and departments in response to the question “As you think about the perspectives, knowledge and skills that have enabled you to do your professional work since seminary, how important have the following areas of study been to your professional life and work?”<sup>14</sup>

There is remarkable unanimity in the highest and lowest rankings, and they match the responses graduating students give when asked how satisfied

they are with their progress in particular areas related to their future work (Figure 19.) All graduates, no matter the religious tradition of the school they attended, say that Bible and theology (Talmud/philosophy for rabbinical students) were most important. When asked to identify the single course that has had the most lasting impact, graduates in equal numbers most often cite a course in Bible or theology. These fields are mentioned more than five

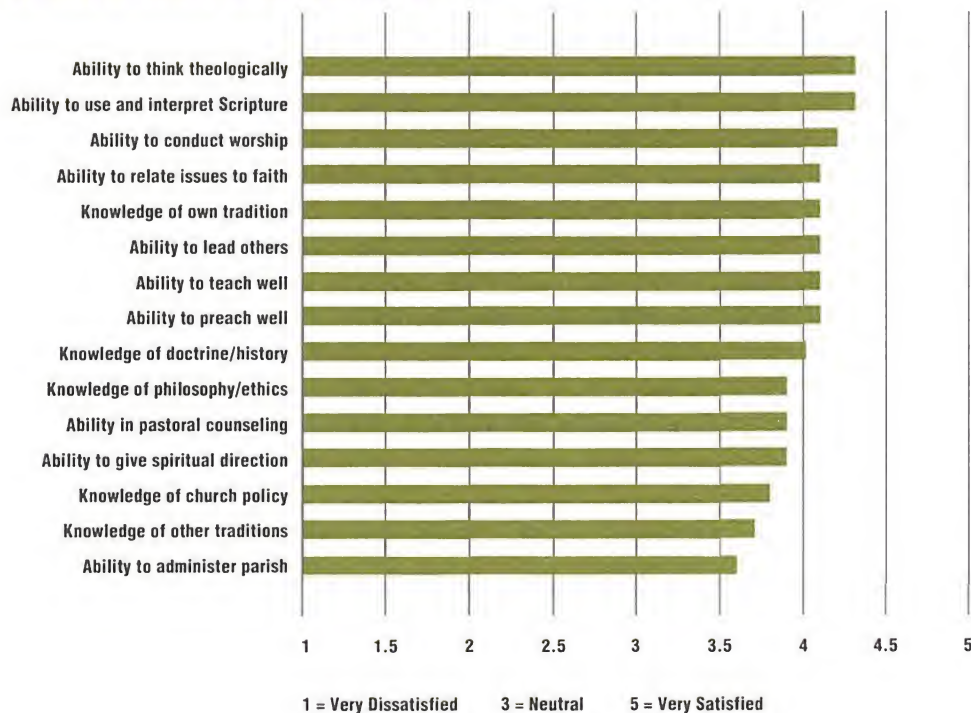


times as often as the next-most-often cited field, the broad area of “ministry,” which comprises courses in several specialty areas. Similarly, graduating students from ATS schools say they are best prepared in their ability to think theologically and interpret scripture. World religions (for all groups) as well as congregational administration and church polity (for Christians) are ranked lowest, by graduates and graduating students alike (see Figure 18).

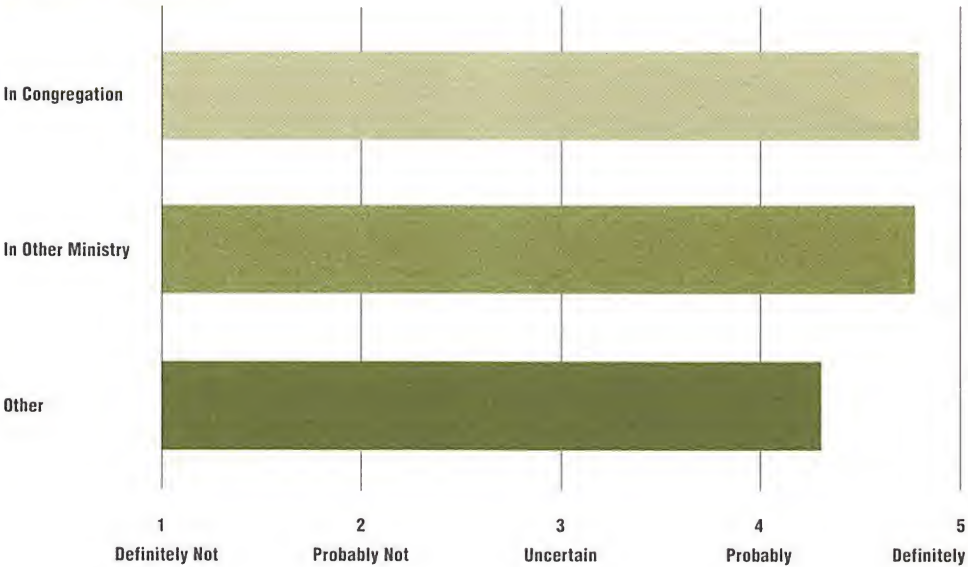
These findings have prompted a great many hypotheses among theological school deans and others who heard preliminary versions of this report. Few were surprised that Bible and theology were ranked highest. “Understanding

God truly” (theology, in the words of the theologian David Kelsey) and mining the source texts of one’s religious tradition, far more than the functional specialties in which ministers engage, are at the core of the priesthood, the ministry, and the rabbinate. Further, these are prestigious fields in the world of theological studies. They attract many talented scholars and teachers, giving schools wide choice when they have positions to fill. Professors in these subject areas often become symbols of the identity of the schools in which they teach, and thus are likely to be chosen with great care, for their teaching ability as well as their scholarly reputation.

**Figure 19: Level of Satisfaction with Progress in Skills Related to Future Work, M.Div., 1997**



**Figure 20: Would You Choose to Attend Seminary At All?  
By Current Position**

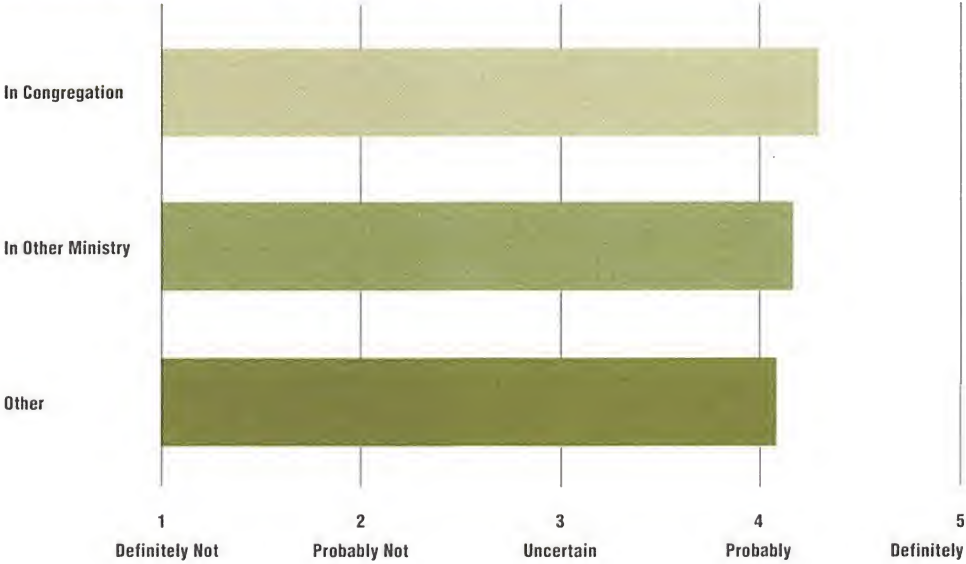


There was less agreement about what lies behind the lowest rankings of practical areas such as congregational administration and “faith practices” that ought to have immediate relevance for practitioners. Some think that the problem may be teaching: the relatively low status of “practical” subjects and the scarcity of highly trained teachers<sup>15</sup> may contribute to less adequate teaching in these areas. Others believe that the problem is learning; that students preparing for ministry do not yet have the motivation to take these studies seriously and therefore do not take away enough from practical courses to judge them valuable. One further theory is that the ratings are influenced by the culture that forms students in seminaries and that confers more approval and prestige on “classical”

studies, especially Bible and theology, than on practical ones.

The very low ranking of world religions also generates various hypotheses and some puzzlement, given the rapidly increasing religious pluralism of North America. One explanation is that five to ten years ago—and even now—theological and rabbinical schools’ offerings in this area were and are limited. (Graduates were offered a “not applicable” option for each area of study, but they may have overlooked that.) Another is that religious professionals, immersed as most of them are in a congregation or other organization of particular faith tradition, are less likely rather than more likely than other North Americans to

**Figure 21: Would You Choose to Attend The Same Seminary Or Theological School Again? By Current Position**



find themselves engaged with persons and organizations of other religious traditions, particularly those outside their broad faith tradition (i.e., Christianity or Judaism).

There is more variety in the middle range of the graduates’ rankings. Mainline Protestants rank preaching high and missions low. Roman Catholics rank moral theology (abbreviated as “ethics” in Figure 18) and spiritual formation (“spiritual practices”) above other subjects and preaching in the bottom half of the middle rankings. Evangelical Protestants give higher rankings to spiritual formation, counseling, missions, and ethics. These differences seem accurately to reflect both the cultures of the religious traditions to which the schools belong and the strengths of different sectors of theological education.

**SUMMARY: GOOD GRADES  
WITH ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT**

However graduates rank particular fields of instruction, the entire theological education experience seems to have been highly positive. Ninety-one percent would “definitely” or “probably” attend theological or rabbinical school if they had it to do over again. Those serving in any kind of ministry are more likely to say “definitely” and those in other lines of work “probably” but all the ratings are high (Figure 20). Perhaps even more impressively, four out of five would “definitely” or “probably” attend the same school. Those currently serving in congregations (Figure 21) are slightly more satisfied, as are graduates who have never switched denominations.



**Figure 22: Rank Order of Areas of Study:  
Effectiveness of Education and Importance in Ministry**

Area of study	Effectiveness of education	Crucial in ministry
Religious heritage	1	4
Cultural context	2	3
Personal & spiritual formation	3	1
Ministerial & public leadership	4	2

(There are, interestingly, no significant differences in the responses to the “do again” questions between graduates from denominational schools and nondenominational schools, even though elsewhere these two groups of graduates tend to mirror the responses of nonswitchers and switchers.) Even with variations, however, the approval voiced in these responses for particular schools as well as for theological education in general by graduates looking back over a five- to ten-year period is very high.

In the estimation of their graduates, theological and rabbinical schools seem to be doing a very good job of preparation for the practice of ministry and related professions. At the same time, there are problem areas. Graduates, asked to rate the effectiveness of their studies in broad fields of study, gave highest marks to “providing a comprehensive understanding of your religious heritage,” and lower ratings to (in rank order, as shown in Figure 22) “an understanding of cultural context,” “personal and spiritual formation,” and “cultivating the capacity for ministerial and public leadership.” Asked to rate these same areas on the basis of “how crucial” each “has proved to be for your work since seminary,” the rank order is almost

opposite: personal/spiritual formation and ministerial/public leadership were first and second, followed by cultural context and then religious heritage. There is a discrepancy, in other words, between what theological schools are best at providing and what practitioners say is most crucial in ministry.

This finding lends some weight to the theory that practical subject areas were rated low because they are not structured or taught well enough, and not because they are not important to practitioners. Answers to the open-ended question “What should be included in seminary or theological education that was not?” provide additional support for this view: there is an inverse correlation between the number of times a subject area is mentioned in response to this question and the rank order of the subject as shown in Figure 18. Congregational administration, for instance, is the most requested area for new or additional instruction; Bible and theology are mentioned least often. In the following section on recommendations, we comment on the problem of high demand for instruction in the practical fields of study and its low ratings.



## Recommendations

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The foregoing data and analysis lead us to several recommendations.

### **A. THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS SHOULD INCREASE THEIR SUPPORT OF STUDENTS' VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT PROCESSES, EMPHASIZING CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY AS AN OPTION.**

A major finding of this study is that many students gravitate to congregational ministry during their course of study. The data also show, however, that this effect is weaker than it was five years ago, probably because categories of students who show less than average interest in congregational ministry, such as younger students and women, are an increasingly large portion of the total student body. If these trends are not addressed, they could lead to shortages in trained congregational leadership, especially young leaders, in Protestantism and Judaism in the future. (Roman Catholics are already facing a critical shortage of ordained clergy to serve parishes, though the cause is the paucity of celibate male applicants to seminary rather than diversion of seminary students to other vocational tracks.)

What can be done to keep congregational ministry prominent among the options that seminary students consider? We have three suggestions:

1. *Schools can address the question of vocation directly.* Some do this currently, in periodic comprehensive reviews of academic progress and professional development, or in small groups that focus on formation and personal growth. Often, however, these activities are

optional or, if required, they are not given the same weight as other curricular or co-curricular elements.

Every school should organize offerings that engage students in serious vocational discernment. (Whether these activities are mandatory or not depends on the culture of the school. In some institutions certain voluntary programs have more influence on students' thinking than those that are required.) Such programs might be led by skilled counselors or faculty with special gifts for student advisement; leadership might also include

### **Schools should take steps to assure that students are prompted to reflect on vocational issues and supported in their efforts to do so.**

graduates or other religious professionals who can speak knowledgeably and enthusiastically about ministry in various forms, including congregational ministry. Regardless of the format of these programs, vocational clarity should be a goal for all theological students. Schools should take steps to assure that students are prompted to reflect on vocational issues and supported in their efforts to do so. Further, schools should track the stated vocational interests of entering and exiting students and graduates in at least their first decade after finishing seminary. (A new questionnaire for graduates, based on the survey instrument used in this study, will be

available from the ATS. Used in combination with the existing questionnaires for entering and exiting students, it should make such tracking easier.) From time to time, schools should evaluate the vocational trajectories of their students and graduates in light of the institution's

**If the purpose of the school includes providing leaders for congregations, an adequate number of congregational field sites should be developed to give all students a good taste of ministry in this form.**

mission. If the profile of students' occupations and the purposes of the school diverge, either adjustment of the mission or changes in recruitment and program are called for.

Most of the religious traditions represented in this study give the seminary little or no say in decisions about admission to professional religious service.<sup>16</sup> Some may argue that in these cases, vocational decision-making should take place under the supervision of churches and religious movements rather than theological schools. The primary role of religious bodies notwithstanding, schools have a role to play in reflecting on vocation. As our data show, theological education steers toward professional ministry significant numbers of students who do not come to seminary with an interest in it. Those students may not be enrolled with a denomination and therefore will

not be included in and influenced by denominational programs. Further, students in M.A. programs tend to be overlooked by religiously sponsored oversight mechanisms. As this study has demonstrated, however, half of these students become religious professionals and one-third serve congregations. Further, they have high stability in the ministry: once they take a ministry position, they stay in it. School-based vocational discernment programs should include students in M.A. and M.Div. programs who are uncertain about their interest in ordination or ministry as well as those whose aim is to confirm or specify their call to religious service.

2. *Schools should pay renewed attention to field education and internships.* Fifty years ago, when supervised field education and full-time internships were relatively new curriculum elements in many theological schools, sustained attention was paid to the development of field sites, the training of supervisors, the design of concurrent ministry courses or reflection groups, and the matching of students to field settings that would broaden and deepen their experience of ministry. In the interval since, field education has become standard, even routine, and internships are an option in virtually every school. In some institutions these two forms of in-ministry education have had the tendency to migrate back toward their origins as paying jobs during seminary that have some educational relevance. It is not unusual now for students to locate field sites or internship opportunities that fit their interests and that are subsequently

approved by the school. This looser approach, observes one seasoned theological educator who reviewed the findings of this study, is in tune with the individualized spirit of the times, but it also makes it less likely that students will be challenged to discover and explore forms of ministry that do not immediately appeal to them. Design-your-own in-ministry education also increases the chances of an unproductive or unhappy experience, because the supervisor may be inadequate and have little or no connection to the seminary.

Schools that have permitted field and internship education to drift or students to find their own way should provide more structure. The roster of field sites should mirror the purposes and values of the school. If these purposes include providing leaders for congregations, an

**Anecdotal evidence suggests that programs that steer young students to seminary are valuable resources for the discernment processes of some very able students.**

adequate number of congregational field sites should be developed to give all students a good taste of ministry in this form. Students should be matched by the school to preselected sites that are consonant with student goals and interests but that also offer ministry experiences that students might not

have devised for themselves. Whereas a completely happy experience cannot be guaranteed, trained supervisors can help students to learn from uncomfortable and satisfying situations alike. All these steps will help to ensure that theological field education and internships will contribute to the process of vocational discernment and promote the goal of vocational clarity.

*3. National programs that encourage young people to explore vocations in ministry should be continued and expanded.* During the last two decades, Lilly Endowment and other foundations have underwritten programs designed to stimulate interest in theological education and ministry, especially among recent college graduates. These projects have included programs for high school students that introduce them to theology and ministry, using techniques that have proven useful in other fields for early identification of future professionals. Other programs, many under the auspices of the Fund for Theological Education, have targeted college students and seminary students who have been singled out for their promise for ministry, as well as their traditional constituency of minority doctoral and ministry candidates.

These programs should be continued. Although there has not yet been a systematic evaluation of the impact of these programs, the anecdotal evidence from schools whose average entering student age has dropped substantially in recent years strongly suggests that these programs steer students to seminary who might not otherwise have considered



it and that they are valuable resources for the discernment processes of some very able students.

**B. BETTER SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR WOMEN IN SEMINARY AND MINISTRY SHOULD BE PUT IN PLACE.**

Forty years ago, when women were entering seminaries in significant numbers for the first time, some institutions put in place special programs for women students. These programs provided support—programs on women in ministry, vocational counseling, and placement assistance—and sometimes advocated for women's interests. (In the earliest days these included such basic matters as the conversion of restrooms for women's use; later, advocacy focused on causes such as the appointment of women faculty and administrators and

**Unless special efforts are made to recruit women for and retain them in ministerial and rabbinical positions, including positions of congregational leadership, religious communities may lose talent they sorely need.**

the promotion of equality for women in religious organizations and in the wider society.) Programs to support women in seminary often had part-time staff; in larger schools and consortia, there was at least one full-time staff member. Women's caucuses were common; many institutions had a meeting and office space dedicated to women's activities.

Today, women constitute 34 percent of all theological students and 50 percent or more in many mainline Protestant

schools and rabbinical programs. Now that their presence is taken for granted and still increasing in some quarters, special programs, staff, organizations, and space for women are less common. Our study shows, however, that even graduates of schools where women are present in equal numbers with men progress more slowly into ministerial professions. Their level of interest in ministry, especially congregational ministry, is lower (though their interest increases at a faster rate during seminary than does that of men). They are less likely to work in ministerial positions. If they do, it takes them longer to get such jobs, and they are less likely to stay in ministry. Some of these differences can, we noted, be explained by the fact that women become full-time caretakers of children and parents at much higher rates than men. The rest, however, seems to be due to continuing prejudice against women in ministerial professions.

For this reason, both theological schools and religious bodies should give targeted attention to women preparing for and working in ministry. Students should have some of the opportunities that special programs used to afford them: the opportunity to meet women who can function as role models in ministry, field education placements in settings designed to encourage their interest, individual vocational counseling and opportunities to talk with other women students about



vocational directions, academic resources that highlight the contributions of women in theology and in churches and religious movements, and help in finding and negotiating a first placement. Previous studies have shown that women students' credentials are at least as strong as those that men bring to seminary. Unless special efforts are made to recruit women for and retain them in ministerial and rabbinical positions, including positions of congregational leadership, religious communities may lose talent they sorely need.

**C. FACULTIES OF THEOLOGICAL AND RABBINICAL SCHOOLS SHOULD PAY GREATER ATTENTION TO THE TEACHING OF THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY.**

The study has found that seminary graduates rank the instruction they received in most practical subject areas lower than instruction in the fields of Bible and theology. Simultaneously, when asked what is missing from the seminary curriculum, they are likely to mention practical subject areas, which elsewhere they indicate, had little effect on their professional practice. One conclusion to draw from this pair of findings is that the teaching of practical subjects is not adequate.

In foregoing sections of this report we analyzed at length possible reasons that the teaching of practical subjects is less adequate. Other subjects have more prestige in faculties and receive more weight in the curriculum; teachers in "academic" disciplines may be more highly trained and therefore more experienced teachers; students may not be ready to learn about practice until they are actually on the job and deeply

immersed in practice. Each of these explanations probably has some validity.

Experienced educators who reviewed the preliminary findings of this study suggested another theory. They noted

**One avenue of reform that might be explored is pedagogy—the better fitting of teaching methods to subject matter in ministry courses. Better practical instruction during seminary and the first years of practice should be a major goal.**

that the practical subjects in the middle tier—field education, preaching, and pastoral counseling—are those that are taught clinically, with the student's actual practice as the basis for further study and reflection. This observation led some to suggest that one avenue of reform that might be explored is pedagogy—the better fitting of teaching methods to subject matter.

We strongly urge theological faculties to turn their attention to both the contents of and methods used in the ministry fields. Despite nearly a century of innovations and growth in these fields (more than 20 percent of all faculty members in ATS schools teach in a ministry or practical subject area), students and graduates are not satisfied with what they learn in practical courses. Better practical instruction during seminary and the first years of practice should be a major goal.

**D. THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS AND  
THEIR SPONSORING CHURCHES OR  
RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS SHOULD  
COOPERATE MORE CLOSELY  
IN EVALUATING AND STRENGTHENING  
THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION.**

The most surprising finding of this study is how positive graduates are in their retrospective assessment of their theological education. How is it, then, that so many religious officials believe that seminaries are not doing a good job? We suspect that there are too few occasions on which denominational and seminary leaders' paths intersect. Seminaries and religious bodies become separate worlds and grow different cultures that harbor stereotypes of each other. On the seminary side, all complaints from religious officials are attributed to anti-intellectual bias on

the part of practitioners; for their part, denominational leaders caricature seminaries as ivory towers remote from religious bodies and from the world.

In fact, seminary and denominational leaders have common interests and goals. They should pursue the facts about theological education—in seminary and beyond—together, and acknowledge the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the kinds of formation that ministers receive in school and beyond. Then they should work together to support and strengthen both theological schools and in-service programs. Such an alliance between schools of ministerial education and the religious communities their graduates serve is critical if religious bodies, their congregations, and professional leaders are to flourish in the future. ■

## Endnotes

1. For conciseness, the terms "theological schools" and "theological institutions" are used in this report to refer to graduate-level seminaries, rabbinical schools, university divinity schools and university colleges in Canada. "Theological" is used in the names of many Roman Catholic and Protestant schools and in one Jewish school, though we recognize that it is not in wide use in rabbinical education.
2. David Roozen, "10,001 Congregations: H. Paul Douglass, Strictness and Electric Guitars," (Review of Religious Research, Vol 44:1, 2001). The findings were originally published in a Hartford Seminary study, *Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today (2001)*, 66-67, available at <http://fact.hartsem.edu/Final%20FACTrpt.pdf>.
3. Although the survey was mailed to graduates from 1995 and 2000, responses were received from graduates from 1990 to 2001. For this analysis graduates have been divided into two cohorts, those graduating from 1990 to 1995, and those graduating from 1996 to 2001.
4. Questionnaires were mailed to approximately 10,000 graduates who earned M.Div., M.A., and comparable degrees; 2,323 usable returns were received, for a return rate of approximately 23 percent. (The rate is approximate because many surveys were mailed to schools for distribution to their graduates and not all schools reported the exact number of surveys mailed.)
5. Currently, 130 to 135 schools participate in the program. In 2006-07, 6,947 students completed the ESQ and 5,113 completed the GSQ.
6. The term ministry is used in this report to refer to the ordained roles of priest, rabbi, and minister, as well as to nonordained religious professionals.
7. We checked this figure, because we were concerned that it might be an artifact of who chose to return our questionnaire. We compared our finding that three-quarters of graduates in M.Div. programs take a first position in a congregation with the results of a class census taken by Union Theological Seminary, whose graduates pursue diverse careers after graduation. Union's results were the same: three-quarters of its class served first in a congregation.
8. For example: Master's in Evangelism, Pastoral Counseling, Religious Education, Worship and Music, etc.
9. Anthony Ruger, Sharon L. Miller, Kim Maphis Early, *The Gathering Storm: Educational Debt of Theological Students*, Auburn Studies No. 12, 2005.
10. Barbara G. Wheeler, *Is There a Problem?: Theological Students and Religious Leadership for the Future*, Auburn Studies No. 8, 2001.
11. T. Whitaker, T. Weismiller, E. Clark, *Assuring the Sufficiency of a Frontline Workforce: A National Study of Licensed Social Workers*. Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers. March 2006.
12. In religious communities where the numbers of clergy are insufficient, such as the Roman Catholic Church, contextual factors rather than theological schools account for the shortage.
13. Two earlier Auburn research projects focused on doctoral programs in theology and religion (Barbara G. Wheeler, *True and False: The First in a Series of Reports from a Study of Theological School Faculty*, Auburn Studies No. 4, 1996; Barbara G. Wheeler, Sharon L. Miller, Katarina Schuth, *Signs of the Times: Present and Future Theological Faculty*, Auburn Studies No. 10, 2005). Both studies found that these programs are highly selective, drawing students from a deep pool of interested applicants, most of whom have a Master's-level degree from a theological school or Jewish training institution. From this we conclude that theological schools are doing an adequate job in steering students with high academic aptitude in the direction of advanced study.
14. Note that the chart shows *rankings* based on ratings of importance. A subject given the same rank by two different subgroups may have been given a higher rating by one group than the other.
15. *Hard to Find: Searching for Practical Faculty in the 1990's*, Auburn Center Background Reports, No. 8, 2002.
16. Exceptions include Jewish movements in which the seminary ordains to the rabbinate, and some Protestant denominations that require a formal assessment of fitness from the theological school.

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